

Suburban Space and Multicultural Identities in Christos Tsiolkas's *The Slap*

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Since the first publication of Christos Tsiolkas's fourth novel, *The Slap*, in 2008, it has received a great deal of commercial and critical attention both domestically and, in more recent years, internationally. This popularity and rapid subsequent enrollment into the literary mainstream is, it could be argued, in large part due to the accessible prose and book-club compatibility of its core narrative trajectory, which traces a topical and thought-provoking depiction of conflicting sets of generational "family values," domestic politics, and explicit and implicit class conflict, the drama unfolding among an eclectic range of frequently unsympathetic yet believable, identifiable, and compelling characters. This narrative accessibility has been further emphasized by the production of two distinct episodic adaptations for television. The first, a successful ABC adaptation in 2011, preserved much of the contemporary flavor and cultural specificity of the original text and starred a number of familiar Australian actors including Jonathan LaPaglia, Essie Davis, and Melissa George. A much less successful US remake followed in 2015, featuring American actors in each of the major roles and, somewhat inexplicably, relocating the action from the suburbs to the brownstones of the New York borough of Brooklyn. Despite the geographic differences between the two adaptations, both retain the key narrative thrust of Tsiolkas's novel, charting the consequences of an act of corporal punishment—the titular "slap"—of a misbehaving small boy at a social gathering.

The publicity for both the novel and its televisual adaptations have tended to emphasize the intergenerational, family-saga aspect of the narrative—the official reading-group study notes produced by Allen and Unwin, for instance, breathlessly describe *The Slap* as "a powerful, haunting novel about love, sex and marriage, parenting and children, and the fury and intensity—all the passions and conflicting beliefs—that family can arouse" (2). Despite the focus of these hyperbolic claims—which ironically recall the melodramatic tropes of the vacuous soap opera within the novel, discussed in more detail later—what is equally if not more significant in terms of broader cultural and critical impact than this principal narrative drive (resonant with readers though it may be) is the novel's parallel analysis of the multicultural nature of

contemporary Australian society and the perceived “success” or “failure” of the motives and practices of that attempted integratory process. The novel’s most promising subject for close analysis, therefore, is in fact the ways in which it explores contemporary anxieties around the dissonant discourses of ethnicity and authenticity in the context of Australian multiculturalism. This essay seeks to interrogate the ways in which the novel can be seen to negotiate the politics of this complex issue and its postcolonial implications, by focusing primarily on its deployment of the suburb as its principal geographical setting. The essay will outline how Tsiolkas—himself the son of first-generation Greek immigrants—articulates the contemporary suburban space as a liminal zone of spatial and conceptual contact and tension, simultaneously empirical and cognitive; the novel deploys a range of epistemological and sociological approaches that construct (and deconstruct) the contemporary Australian suburb as a site of intersecting and competing cultural and physical geographies in which power relationships continually shift, gesturing simultaneously toward both the promise of an attainable multicultural identity and the threat of its annihilation.

I begin by contextualizing the problematic concept of suburbia in Australian literature and culture in general. In Andrew McCann’s evocative and apt phrase, “suburbia has been a neuralgic point in debates about Australian culture and Australian identity since the end of the nineteenth century” (vii), that is, since the nation formally came into being when the six colonies and Tasmania federated in 1901. As a number of critics have pointed out, Australian literature in particular has tended to adopt an antisuburban position, with “canonical” or “classic” Australian literature tending to privilege the bush and the city as the twin poles of worthwhile existence and experience, with the “in-between” space of suburbia effectively ignored or marginalized. Frequently, even entirely non-Australian geographic spaces are privileged as sites of narrative importance over the moribund Australian suburb—Nathanael O’Reilly, in his comprehensive *Exploring Suburbia: The Suburbs in the Contemporary Australian Novel*, reminds us that “Australia’s most important national narratives [. . .] take place in the bush, the outback and overseas” (1) and that even such a vital text in the consolidation of a distinctively Australian literary voice as David Malouf’s masterful, semiautobiographical bildungsroman novel *Johnno* explicitly sets up a binary between the cultural exhaustion of the suburbs and “Europe as the source of culture” (111), with occasional grudging acknowledgment of the slightly less backward urban core of Brisbane. In the influential 1990 essay “Gerrymander: The Place of Suburbia in Australian Fiction,” Robin Gerster also emphasizes the prevalence and centrality of urban narratives in Australian literary culture but makes broadly the same point in asserting that the liminal zone of suburbia “is habitually dismissed with cosmopolitan contempt by urban-oriented writers as a place fit solely for satire [. . .] if indeed it is worth writing about at all” (565).

The Slap, although evidently representing a sustained critical engagement with the notion of suburbia, is not, I propose, part of that tradition of satire or the "distinct, sometimes virulent strain of anti-suburbanism" (79) to which Graham Huggan refers in his *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*. Rather, Tsiolkas's text constitutes an intervention within Australian literature that serves to complicate "crudely simplistic notions of suburbia" (ibid.) as a space of ordinary homogeneity and implied whiteness-as-normativity. The suburb, then, features much more ambivalently in such fictions as "both a real and imagined space within which the contradictions of Western industrial/capitalist modernity are negotiated" (ibid.). Tsiolkas's novel treats suburbs radically as an essentially vital, valuable, and self-sustaining locus of cultural discourse and analysis, worthy of fictional exploration and discussion as a means of understanding and constructing cognitive maps of the contemporary social order. This recalls McCann's claim that suburbia is both "a tangible site, a distinct set of social and spatial relations," and, in a formulation that clearly owes much to Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as "imagined community," a "discursive fiction, a facet of various imaginary topographies in which it is stigmatised or mythologised according to certain ideological and aesthetic imperatives" (viii). Tsiolkas offers an ambivalent yet ultimately profound, nuanced, and persuasive reading of suburban space that exposes and attempts to reconcile anxieties about a long-ignored space of cultural contact onto which, as Chris Healy has observed, "a vast array of fears, desires, insecurities, obsessions and yearning have been projected and displaced" (xiii).

The Slap's structure and the diverse friendship group at its center have been accused of tokenism by some reviewers and critics, but the breadth of perspectives and panoply of identitary options deployed allow Tsiolkas to provide a paradigm of the Bakhtinian dialogic novel and, in doing so, to explore aspects of multiculturalism and the matrix of marginalized voices within a suburban context. The polyphonic narrative offers a range of divergent, nominally "Australian," perspectives on identical events and places, and the majority of those voices are coded as "other" in terms of gender, age, status, sexuality, class, or ethnicity. This narrative strategy directly reflects Tsiolkas's long-standing creative-critical preoccupation with suburbia, its limitations and potentialities. *The Slap* builds on the fictional dissection of the suburban imaginary in his first novel, *Loaded* (1995), and is also informed and clearly inspired in part by his "Aleka Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Some Musings on Suburbia, Migration and Film" (1997), a critical piece in which Tsiolkas notes that "the long stretches of suburbia that sprawl for miles in every direction have been largely ignored" and calls for cultural representations to provide a "reading of suburbia as not static and homogeneous but as capable of reflecting the multiple and fractured communities and identities existent in urban Australia" (45).

In some ways, the novel signposts its response to its author's own earlier appeal for more sophisticated responses to the notion of suburban space and gestures toward the metafictional in its playful self-referentiality. There are moments throughout the text where Tsiolkas revels in revealing the politicized motivations underlying his narrative. From the outset, we are encouraged to conceptually locate *The Slap* as a self-aware, "authentic" alternative to the TV writer Anouk's inane soapie in the novel. Upon learning that Anouk is a scriptwriter for a popular but vacuous television soap opera, Gary—who because of his lack of pretension and ambition, coupled with his alcoholism, is dismissively described by his wife, Rosie, as "an exemplary Australian" (256)—lambasts her at some length: "But you're perpetrating bullshit that has an influence on millions of people around the world! Everyone thinks that Australian families are exactly like those on the show. Don't you want to do something better with your writing?" (31). Although Anouk seeks to justify her work on the soapie as part of a broader economic transaction (later describing herself as a "whore"; 70) to enable her to write a "proper" novel, she is aware of the cultural implications of her creations and the inauthenticity of the empty narrative form that is exhausted of any cultural specificity or sociological value. When her friend Aisha opines, "I hate how everything is becoming the same" (70), Anouk is forced to reflect on and admit her own complicity in this process of flattening and erasure of difference in a globalized cultural economy: "I'm part of it. [. . .] I spent a year in Zagreb teaching Croatian writers and directors how to faithfully recreate a soap opera based on a suburban Melbourne family that was itself based on a concept that came from a failed German soapie" (70).

It is significant that Anouk's boyfriend, Rhys, is an actor on the same show, and he is presented at the barbecue as a cipher, draped in meaningless and culturally inappropriate signifiers of frontier masculinity. "The casual but expensive fine cotton cowboy shirt, the black jeans, the confederate flag buckle of his belt" (32) are openly mocked by Gary—described by the family man and protagonist Hector as "a prick, but an astute prick" (33)—who satirically conflates Rhys's sophisticated, store-bought aspirations toward American manhood with the mundane reality of the young man's privileged and uneventful upbringing by sneering, "You shot a man in Vermont, eh? Just to watch him die" (33). The reference to the affluent Melbourne suburb seems apt in exposing the depthlessness of Rhys, the more self-aware Anouk, and the suburbanite cultural landfill they produce—Hector avers that "Vermont was perfect, Vermont was frigging spot-on. The young actor screamed private schools, nutritious breakfasts as a child, the immense bland spread of the eastern suburbs" (33). In Tsiolkas's text, it seems particularly apt that Rhys should be the star of a show mythologizing and replicating the stasis and monolithic nature of those same suburbs. Thus, these fictional suburbs—transmitted and consumed globally in cultural

exports like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*, which, according to Nicole Matthews, “represent an affluent and almost exclusively Anglo-Celtic family life” (173)—are displaced and replaced with the multicultural verisimilitude of Tsiolkas’s own fictional Melbourne, which seeks to restore some ideological and spatial nuance alongside a degree of preserved cultural, political, and chronological specificity.

Building on and subverting the global cultural perception of Australia as the paradigmatic suburban nation (as argued by Matthews), the novel ambivalently yet knowingly deploys a number of other superficially clichéd antisuburban tropes, in particular emphasizing the tendency toward blandness, stasis, and moribundity. However, the range of individual responses to the suburban environment, almost all negative in the novel, can (indeed should) be read ambiguously in the context of the narrative as a whole. For instance, Rosie, one of the supposed “authentic Australians” (71) in the novel, despairingly observes “the unrelenting flat suburban grid of the northern suburbs surround[ing] them” (246); this sense of entrapment and captivity causes her to empathize with her alcoholic husband’s “resistance to even thinking about living here, to settling into this dreary suburban emptiness” (247). The intersection of economic and spatial realities is made explicit: “But it was all they could afford” (247). Even on a more macro level, the “house itself was drab, [. . .] and the place seemed like a shell to Rosie, devoid of personality or charm” (248). The environment is described as “this distillation of bland, ugly suburbia” (249).

Likewise, Richie, the gay teenager who is the principal voice of the novel’s climactic section, is traumatized when his estranged father chooses to meet him “in the middle of nowhere, boganville” (429). The dominant suburban characteristic is once again expressed as an interchangeable, two-dimensional modularity, a metaphorical lack of vitality engendering a kind of living death (like suburbia itself, a hybrid state of existence): “Every street looked the same, every house looked the same, everybody looked the same. It was where you came to die. Zombies lived here” (429).

Despite these frequent and seemingly conservative references to sameness, there is an irony and an intertextual awareness in Tsiolkas’s deployment of antisuburban conventions. Nathanael O’Reilly sums up these conventions usefully when he notes that

the anti-suburban tradition usually fails to delineate between different kinds of suburbs, depicting them all negatively, failing to acknowledge that there are many different kinds of suburb, such as inner, outer, working-class, middle-class, homogenous, multicultural, established, newly developed, low-density, high-density, etc. The term “suburbia” is usually used to describe all of the suburbs as a whole, erasing difference. (“Exploring Indigenous” 10)

It is clear that Tsiolkas's novel, despite its undoubted pessimism and willingness to engage with the conceptual limitations of the suburban space, can be said to reject this oversimplified model of sameness, as the narrative continually articulates a sophisticated and acute awareness of the subtle distinctions of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality that underpin the cultural map of contemporary Australian suburbia. For instance, the narrative knowingly and repeatedly deploys loaded terms such as "bogan" and "westie" to delineate the mutually complicit "real" geographical and "imagined/constructed" class boundaries that divide the various families in the novel and that it appears taboo—or at least significantly problematic—to transgress or permeate.

Once again, Rosie, the putatively "authentic" Australian, is attuned to the nuanced spatial semantics of the suburbs but myopically fails to appreciate their importance: having "lived long enough in this city to understand its divisions and mythologies, she remained uninterested in their pettiness" (264). More explicitly, Hector's cousin Harry (the perpetrator of the eponymous slap) and his wife are significantly described as having permeated class boundaries, which is expressed in spatial/economic terms—having "left their westie childhood and adolescence far behind them: they now lived in prime blue-ribbon real estate" (22). For the transformed Harry, whose identity has fluidly shifted to being, in Anouk's words, "insufferably dull and bourgeois except for the faint linger of a once-dangerous prole virility" (56), the "inferior" working-class suburbs of his childhood seem to leech the vitality from nature itself: "The suburb stretched out flat and monotonous around him, all grey and muted, functional and drab. Even though the beach lay a few blocks south, that too seemed grim and unappealing when compared to the sparkling emerald stretch of sea that lay just outside his front yard. God, he thought, I can't stand the fucking western suburbs" (91). Similarly, one of Harry's successful businesses is described by him resentfully as being "in the middle of ugly bogan suburbia" (100).

Parallel to Harry's nouveau-riche, geographically delineated classism, the casual racism of Richie's father, Craig, serves as a reminder that suburbia is also often conceptually divided along racial and ethnic lines. Speaking to Richie of his friend Connie's new boyfriend, calculatedly described as a "Lebo," Craig says,

"I don't give a fuck if she's rooting some Arab."

"He's Australian. He was born here."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah." Richie pointed around the pub, waving his finger like a wand.

"I know exactly what you mean. You don't like Arabs or Asians or black people or fags or anyone except boring white people out here in zombie suburbia." (432)

This last point is significant, and Richie's insightful response gestures toward the critique at the novel's core. *The Slap* disparages but is not nihilistic toward the suburban; the narrative argues that viewpoints such as Craig's, though seemingly widespread and a key component of the suburban epistemology, are outdated and bear no relationship to the complexities of contemporary Australian society; the novel, then, begins tentatively to suggest new modes of thinking about suburbia as a potentially transformative space. Even Rosie, viewing the overpriced suburban house, rejects the totalizing nihilism of the ant suburbian tradition and clings to "the space, the possibilities" located within the bland little space (248)—a strategy that is mapped onto Tsiolkas's narrative as a whole and that is manifest in Richie's epiphany toward the novel's conclusion.

As Craig's outlook suggests, *The Slap* does not ignore or shy away from confronting the multicultural failures of the suburban mind-set; it also proposes potential avenues for reconfiguring the suburb as a site of multicultural success. The novel uses the antagonisms and overlapping societal matrices of its suburban setting to problematize and question the ambiguous idea of a stable, attainable Australian identity; for Tsiolkas, the concept of an Anglo-Celtic "core culture" around which diversity may be permitted to constellate is meaningless; reconciliation and vitality are instead located in a more complex and (to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's term) rhizomatic multiculturalism. Tsiolkas's work rejects unequivocally the idea that the imagined space of the suburbs is unproblematically synonymous with what Jan Larbalestier calls "the imagined space of White Australia, the cultural centre from which all other ways of being in the world are evaluated, and understandings of assimilation, integration and diversity are accommodated" (147). Tsiolkas has explicitly stated in interview that, from his own experience and contrary to the claims of a "core culture" propagated by the likes of Miriam Dixson in *The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity, 1788 to the Present*, the suburban class was "wog as much as it was Anglo-Celtic, that it had working-class as well as bourgeois roots" (Allen and Unwin 3).

This approach is clear from the outset of the novel. Though subtly ambivalent at first, the narrative questions what Nicole Matthews has called "the long-standing association between the suburbs and [. . .] whiteness" (174). Hector's "routine" and his superficially perfect suburban life are expertly and unobtrusively contrasted with the linguistic and dialectic heterogeneity of the suburban environment; the idiomatic syntax of the "old Chinese guy" Mr. Ling—"You change smoke?" (4)—is presented without comment as evidence of multicultural tolerance.

Similarly, but more problematically, Hector's Anglo-Indian wife, Aisha, is frequently enrolled into a kind of neutral multiculturalism in which her ethnic identity seems ambiguous and provisional. Although Hector's family often refers to her

dismissively as “the Indian,” and Harry goes so far as to make the distinction that she “wasn’t a fucking witless Aussie, she was Indian, a wog” (114), Aisha’s Anglo-Indian heritage is nonetheless located within a deracialized conception of multiculturalism that is problematic in the extreme. Anouk seems to perceive this uncritically as a generational flattening of ethnic difference, an annihilation of Aisha’s ethnic identity through an assimilative process masked as multiculturalism: “[Aisha’s father] Mr Pateer’s plump face was kind, genial, but it had always been inescapably Indian, unavoidably foreign, whereas Aish was her familiar best friend, undoubtedly Australian. She always thought of her as more the daughter of her English mother than of her Indian father” (57). Aisha is therefore often safely situated within an acceptable centralized system of a stabilized core culture, her “difference” justified and recalibrated within a center-margin binary of core identity that permits only a certain level of play and divergence. By juxtaposing Aisha and the likes of Mr. Ling, Tsiolkas’s text subtly encourages us to debate the desirability or otherwise of this process, and the cultural desire to place Aisha’s complex ethnic identity under erasure speaks to those anxieties concerning a destabilized core culture just alluded to.

This strategy of recalibrating relative ethnic and racial positions becomes clearer and more openly antagonistic in the novel, with the explicit rejection of enrollment within a core culture and the subsequent sustained discursive interrogation of the so-called authentic Australia and its originary and mythologized Anglo-Celticism throughout many of the narratives, both from the “ethnic” characters and the self-questioning “skips” themselves.

The shifting of authority, power, and perspective within the text demonstrates a robust rejection of the glib notion of multiculturalism as a frictionless process without racial or ethnic tension. Hector’s Greek family, in particular, seems particularly committed to maintaining a distinctive European sense of identity, which occasionally gestures toward reverse racism in places. Language is clearly a crucial aspect in maintaining this sense of difference in the suburban space of exile, and the subversive strategies of Hector’s family often have a linguistic element. The tongue of the mother country is frequently deployed to criticize the Anglo-Celtic cultural dominant of Australian society: “It’s alright, Ecttora,’ his mother answered in Greek. [. . .] ‘We’re not barbarians or English to bring nothing to a barbecue’” (13). And Harry states, in Greek, “The Australians don’t give a fuck about their children” (22). The metonymic gap is evident in the frequent unglossed Greek terms of abuse—*maraki* (18), *pousti* (91), *malaka* (99), among others—which are significantly italicized but unglossed within the narrative and are uttered principally by first-generation non-Anglo-Celts who resist the assimilative process and its associated value system. This subtly polyglot narrative, then, reflects the decreasing Anglo-Celtic dominance of Australian culture.

The strategy of speaking back to the notion of the desirable core culture also takes place in English: "Hector's mother would turn to the other Greeks, raise her eyebrows and exclaim, *Australezi*, what do you expect? It's in their blood!" (21). Amid numerous other examples of Hector's family's disparagement of monolithic "Australian" culture, even Hector, with his progressive outlook and mixed-race, apparently assimilated wife and children, seeks to undermine and subvert the putative privileged cultural category: "How Hector had been able, without any malice in his tone or distaste in his demeanour, to fill that word, *Australian*, with such derision" (256).

Tsiolkas also articulates a critical engagement with the sensitive claim of Aileen Moreton-Robinson, glossed by Huggan, that "white Anglo-Australians are still free to exercise different forms of race privilege, [. . .] to choose between alternative identity options while continuing to see minority (migrant) and Aboriginal Australians as having their racial/ethnic identities locked in place" (Huggan 75). Anouk's reflection on her friends Bilal and Shamira, along with Rosie, and their fluid senses of self and culture, is revealing in this context:

The three of them had all obviously shed their pasts and grown new, vastly different skins. She glanced over at Aish and she was suddenly convinced that her friend was thinking exactly the same thoughts. It was a shared moment in which they were both pitying and ridiculing the experiences of the three true authentic Australians. Aish and herself, they had real pasts, real histories. Jewish, Indian, migrant; it all meant something, they had no need to make things up, to assume disguises. (71)

Tsiolkas's deployment of the problematic and ironic phrase "authentic Australians," one that recurs throughout the narrative, is particularly important here in that it may be decoded as an explicit rejection of the claim by Suzanne Schech and Jane Haggis that "the boundaries of the national imagination [remain] Eurocentric, cemented around a core of white traditions" (236). Whereas Moreton-Robinson and Schech and Haggis imply that "Australian-ness" is a fixed quantity around which alternative cultures are permitted to circulate within strictly delineated orbits, Bilal problematizes this oversimplified notion by adopting a new name and a new religious identity, in a process that disrupts and overwrites the historical and cultural distinctions among Aboriginal Australians; European, Asian, and African immigrants; and descendants of Anglo-Celtic Australian settlers in a way that is clearly worthy of some comment. In opposition to Aisha's indistinct, generic "otherness" in which the ethnic differences between herself and Anouk are collapsed—the latter clearly understates the extent to which their own self-perceived "ethnic" identities have been compromised and diluted by engagement with the flattening effect of Australian culture, itself a process of "disguising"—Bilal and his wife consciously,

knowingly, and willingly adopt and perform new syncretic cultural identities and adopt new names to reflect this.

All of the five characters in fact are continually shifting along a continuum of cultural and ethnic identity. For Tsiolkas, it is apparent that cultural identity constitutes an ongoing process of continual renegotiation rather than an intervallic oscillation between clearly predefined positions. Although Bilal and his wife are positioned as possible loci of multicultural success, Tsiolkas's text is not, as we have seen, politically naïve, and the latter half of the novel alludes to the tension between that residual, threatened sense of core culture and the alternative identitary choices of true diversity embodied by Bilal and Shamira. Unlike the relatively frictionless enrollment of Aisha, Anouk, et al., the sight of Bilal and Shamira engenders "stares, most discreet, but some rude, a few even threatening" (249) from prospective suburban neighbors, toward this new paradigm of uncompromising Australian multiculturalism: "The man was obviously an Aborigine, the woman a Muslim, but with the complexion and face of a stereotypical Aussie working-class girl. *Who are they?*" (249, emphasis original). Tsiolkas therefore does not imply that this redrawing of conceptual boundaries will be an easy process but offers optimism in that Bilal, despite these societal challenges, "is calm, as though he had finally found repose" (75). *The Slap* implies that "the lacerating awareness of [Australia's] racial history" (75) may conceivably be addressed and some movement toward reconciliation and genuine multiculturalism may be attained by casting off old modes of thinking and adopting this kind of hybridized cultural epistemology.

I conclude this analysis by looking briefly at the narrative of Richie, the marginalized and troubled gay teenager. In an interview for the novel's Australian publishers, Tsiolkas has stated that "the most hopeful voices are those of Connie and Richie, the young people" (Allen and Unwin 3). Richie, although white, possesses a heightened sensitivity toward cultural difference and its various modes of marginalization, and as a consequence, he imaginatively enacts an alternative colonial past and present in Priam, an imagined "small island continent, half the size of Australia, that lay far east of Madagascar, in the middle of the Indian Ocean" (444). In an act of escapism from the rigid boundaries of his own suburban existence, Richie creates maps, notes, sketches, and designs for the alternative space of his imagined country where the Trojans and the Aborigines coexist and intermarry to create a hybrid race (445). Richie's imaginative intervention into the divisive colonial past engenders a moment of epiphany that inspires him to intervene and potentially shape an alternative future in his own divided, fragmented society. It is one of the novel's most moving and transformative moments:

It slowly began to dawn on him that the future was not a straight linear path but a matrix of permutations and possibilities, offshoots from offshoots. The map of the future was three-dimensional—that thought had literally never crossed his mind before. [. . .] The school years were flat, two-dimensional. [. . .] That world was splintering, and no longer made sense: and that, more than anything, that filled him with both a ferocious excitement and an anxious confusion; he could never go back to that other world again. (439)

It is also significant that Richie wants to study “Geomatic Engineering. Geographic Information Systems to be precise,” in order “to make maps” (443)—reflecting his desire to construct a new human geography and to complete the transition from crafting imaginative maps to intervening in reality. Even as Richie prepares to leave for college, Tsiolkas studs his narrative with promising glimpses and signifiers that the old notions of core culture may be beginning to disintegrate and the failures of Australian multiculturalism may well be replaced by a more inclusive future: the transformed, optimistic, forward-looking Richie perceives a previously-unseen “black T-shirt with the Australian flag across the chest except that the Union Jack had been replaced by the Aboriginal flag” and the “young Indian guy who had dyed his hair albino-white” (478)—for Richie, the project of the conceptual blurring of racial and ethnic boundaries has already begun, and the reader is left with the sense that the maps Richie will create in his future will reflect the paradigmatic shifts in perception embedded within such a process.

This novel of continuous conflict along any number of (multi)cultural axes, thus ends on a hearteningly uplifting note. I argue that *The Slap* is a diagnostic rather than an explicitly prescriptive narrative, in its call for the dismantling of outmoded cultural prejudices and the construction of an as yet hazily defined pluralist definition of multiculturalism that occupies a rhizomatic rather than a simplistic center-periphery model. Undoubtedly, though, the novel vigorously rejects the anti-suburban tradition of many of its literary forebears; rather than seeing suburbia as a locus wherein a “core culture” is under siege from external cultural influences that must be resisted, Tsiolkas suggests that it may be more productive in a postcolonial context to perceive it as a potentially transformative space where truly multicultural identities may in the future proliferate—even if that transformation and the path toward it remain nebulous at this point in Australian history.

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Toby Davidson is a West Australian poet now living in Sydney, where he lectures at Macquarie University. In addition to a volume of verse, *Beast Language* (Five Island Press, 2012), he has published a critical study, *Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry* (Cambria Press 2013), shortlisted for the ASAL Walter McCrae Russell Prize. He is also the editor of Francis Webb's *Collected Poems* (UWA Publishing, 2011) and co-founder of Macquarie University's "Words in Place" project, which maps commemorative sites of Australian literature.

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Nicholas Dunlop is Head of English at the University of South Wales. He previously lectured in English at Queen's University Belfast and the University of Birmingham. A specialist in postcolonial writing and contemporary literature, he has published widely and is currently completing a monograph on representations of education and postcolonialism in science fiction.